

WildCORE: Image Future Shock (Part Two)

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Summary: "That 'Ole Daemonite Feeling" The reorganised WildCORE team prepares for their return a radically changed planet Earth.

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WildCORE: IFS

\*\*WildCORE: IFS #2

> <font size="+1">"That `Ole Daemonite Feeling..."<br> Written by  
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Snow crunched beneath their heavy footfalls as they approached the tower of steel and alien metals. At an angle, the white crumbs continued to pelt the world's surface, forming a layer of white over the head and shoulders of the assembled quartet. Along the polar wasteland, however, the ground was not as white as some would think for a place that snowed constantly throughout the 397 day Kherubim year. The ash of dead cities fell with the snow, peppering the ground until a field of white and gray stretched far beyond what any man or woman could see. This was Arteenia, the polar city of northern Khera, home to the world's last remaining spaceport.

Years of invasions and orbital attacks had claimed every other spaceport the world had to offer, an attempt by the D'rahn and Daemonites to prevent the Kherubim from reaching its allied worlds. Only this place remained, hidden in the deep valleys of Arteenia's mountainous spurs. It was here that the five Kherubim, destined to return to their former home of Earth, stood in preparation for the voyage forward.

Leading them both in a literal and physical sense was the Lord Ferrian, his normally ebon skin highlighted by the sun's reflection off the snow-covered slopes. A darkened visor both protected and concealed his eyes, as he remained silent, musing over the mission to

prevent the Daemonites' plundering of Earth. It had only been thirty hours since Ferrian and his cabinet of officers and Lords detected the Daemonite science vessels and there was no explanation as to what prize on Earth they sought.

At his right, towering over them all in height and power, was the Lord Majestros, shoulder length black hair riddled with snow and ash. His brooding face gave evidence that he was not looking forward to returning to Earth. Case in fact, he had only agreed to the journey out of respect for Kenesha who he had played guardian to for centuries. Crows feet lined the edges of Majestros' eyes and though the others thought it was from his age, it was actually due to his extended lack of sleep. Generations had lived and died since Majestros smiled last and countless civilizations might crumble before he would do so again.

Kenesha, still known as Savant, followed closely behind, her arms brought tight beneath her breasts as she fought to sustain some amount of heat. Her goggles kept her worry for Majestros hidden as she watched the powerhouse march on as if something inside him were truly dead, de-sensitized after millennia of war and tragedy. Deep inside she too was fearful for this mission, as it had been more than two hundred years since this same group had left Earth to its own fates. Given the friends and memories she left behind, Savant never spent a day without hope that she could return. Now that day had come but not without an overlaying sense of dread.

Behind them all, out of earshot, were the last two members of this group. She was a warrior born, a Majestrix of a warrior sisterhood. When she had first arrived on Earth thousands of years ago, she brought her religion and culture with her and was later shunned when that Order grew beyond her influence. She had returned to Khera and restored the original Coda Order, bringing it back to and beyond its former glory. If the zealot known as Zannah loved anything, she hid it well, just as she did the pain of leaving Earth behind those two hundred years ago. Zealot knew little about mercy and a lot about vengeance but where did that leave the other 'unnecessary' emotions such as love, guilt or sorrow? All were certain that if Zealot ever possessed these things, she cut them out with her Clef blade centuries ago.

He was the newest amongst them; an android created several generations after the original. The original was based on one of Khera's finest warriors, the final fate of which still remained a grand mystery. The legacy of that hero was passed on to each android that came after; digital anagrams encoded into its complex yet perfect robot brain. He was Spartan, the embodiment of cold logic and precise analytical processes. His firepower was as magnificent as his intelligence and yet all of it seemed labored by some hint of nostalgia, something striving to break free of its programming and sub-routines. Something lived behind the eyes of Spartan Mark XXVI, but none were keen enough to catch it... including himself.

"Forgive the question, Zannah, but I am curious as to your thoughts on the mission at hand."

"Don't be a fool, Spartan. You and those you replaced have fought by my side for ages. By now there should be little mystery as to how I feel... if all else fails deduce something and leave me be." Zealot tried to quicken her step, angry that her refined body could not

outperform against his inner hydraulics.

Spartan's face mimicked visual displeasure but he continued at her pace, intent on an answer. "I can ascertain that Ferrian is dreading the mission, not wanting to continue further bloodshed. I also imagine that he fears involving the Earth just as the Kherubim had done after its first arrival. Savant has urged for our return since the news that the Daemonites had sent agents after the mythical Grail. I would expect that she would be happy to return, as her curiosity has always been her driving force. Majestros---"

Zannah stopped abruptly and turned on Spartan, her face flush and her eyes ablaze. "What is it you want from me, construct?"

"Simply to know how you feel about returning to Earth after being gone for over two hundred years. Certainly there is little chance that any of your former comrades are alive. Marc Slayton and the Lord Emp's WildC.A.T.S. insisted on staying on Earth but you seemed content on leaving... eager, in fact. I am curious as to why you are going at all."

Zealot bundled an armored fist and pressed it harshly against her crimson thigh plates. "And why would you know this? What difference does this make? I have outlived any man I dared to love and any non-Kherubim I dared to trust. Do you not think that after all these millennia, my heart has hardened over such loss? This is a mission to destroy a Daemonite party with the opportunity to glean more intelligence from their vile mouths before I rend their brains with my heel!"

Spartan quieted and seemed to darken as if creating his own shadow to hide in. "I was... simply making conversation, Zannah. Small talk, if you will..."

"Let me make this clear so that your mind need not take the effort to analyze my meaning... you are nothing to me. You are a MOCKERY of a great man. You are not Hadrian, nor are you the man he was based upon, Y'on Khol. His mind has been uploaded into so many of you pathetic machines that his soul is truly lost. I see you and I scoff that you wear his face or speak with his voice and if I had it my way I would cease the construction of you and any that would supercede you!" Zealot stormed off, thumping her fist against her thigh in a rhythmic beat. Spartan, for a multi-second, was relieved that it was not him that she was thumping in a rhythmic beat .

When Zannah joined Ferrian at the front of the pack, the group's informal leader barely acknowledged her presence, choosing only to reprimand her. "You shouldn't be so hard on him."

"I'm sure he will get over it, Ferrian. It isn't like he has any feelings for me to hurt," Zannah replied bitterly.

"You don't know that. The extent of Spartan's `feelings' or `emotions' has never been explored. I tend to believe he has them but that he can't figure out how to use them since his flawless logic tends to dominate his thoughts. I'd like to believe that somewhere in that machine head of his, John Colt is still alive."

Zealot clenched her jaw at the name and for a moment felt a pang of guilt and sorrow though she would never admit to it.

"I tend to agree with Zannah," came the soft-spoken words from Majestic. "I see him as nothing more than a cruel reminder of a great man."

"The last thing I need from you, Majestros, is your sympathy. Not after what YOU have done!"

Ferrian remained in awe that Majestic could say such a thing, not after all these years. "Hold up!" Ferrian stopped and pressed a gloved hand on Majestros' massive chest. "This isn't a new predicament we are in. Spartan, in one form or another, has fought alongside you both for more than two millennia. You two are going on as if this is new situation for you!"

"Perhaps the facts are not new, Ferrian. Maybe just the ability to voice what has toiled within us for so long is." Majestros looked to Zannah and seemed to back away from the cold stare he received.

"Whoa! Testosterone check!" Savant exclaimed as she stepped up to the elder trio. "Are we discussing ancient history again? You know it's my favorite subject but enough is enough for crissakes!"

"Savant is right. We have more important matters on hand. You want to tear the hell out of someone... save the shit for the Daemonites!" Ferrian turned away and resumed his march, the peak of the launch tower just now appearing within the belly of the valley.

"It's pretty obvious how you feel about Spartan, Zannah, but you'd better get used to the fact that this might be the last time we fight alongside him." Savant held her older sister from joining the others, her hand pressed firm against Zealot's armored belly.

"What?" Zannah looked down at her sister, just now taking her gaze off of Majestic. "What are you talking about, Kenesha?"

"Spartan wasn't lying. Khera's resources aren't what they used to be. You might notice that we're not lining the ship's walls with spare Spartan drones. We lose him this time, and that's it. He's gone... and so is anything he is carrying inside that metal melon he has. Just think on that... if there's any 'care' left in that brainwashed, Coda cranium of yours that is." Savant took her hand off Zealot and ran her graceful fingers through her short blonde hair. With a shrug and a hand twirling in the air, she walked off, leaving Zealot to her thoughts and whispers.

"That is the problem, little sister... I do care."

The vessel that awaited them was a work of art despite the years of war and destruction Khera and her allied planets had endured, but then again the Kherubim didn't do things ugly. Large wings sprouted from its belly and folded skyward at its ends. The nose was like that of a large metal whale, sloped at the tip with a break at its center that was something like a maw but was actually the ship's cockpit. Twin fins jetted from its tail and a massive cluster of rectangular engines clustered at its stern. Black and silver the vessel was well camouflaged by the natural shadows of the valley's jagged crevices. Emblazoned in crimson, written in Khera's ancient language was the ship's name, roughly translated as "Goodspeed."

Waiting at the base of the launch pad, with the \_Goodspeed\_ settled in a forty-five degree angle behind him, was someone not completely unfamiliar to Ferrian and the others. This was a Kherubim bred for battle and molded for all-out war. Gold segments of armor were bonded to his flesh in no particular sense or order, thick cables jutting from his skin and meeting at a circular apparatus over his heart and gun-like barrels along his forearms. The skin of his arms, neck and legs were ridged, further evidence that whatever the purpose of the cables were, they ran throughout his body. Being a product of modern Kherubim military science, the cold-hearted researchers had at least done him the honor of leaving his face intact. With auburn colored hair over his brow and a messy part to his side, the man faced the approaching party with a pair of bright blue eyes that seemed to simmer without the presence of a single pupil.

"Kannon! I was told you'd be here," Ferrian greeted, clasping the man's hand with his own and slapping his shoulder in greeting.

"And miss your latest crusade, Lord Ferrian? Never!" Kannon smiled and acknowledged the others of rank and status higher than his own.

"Vallaran, it is good to see you again. After the meltdown in East Forstrata, we feared the worst," Majestic said.

"Nothing Kherubim science, couldn't fix, Lord Majestros." Kannon ended his remark by turning back to Ferrian, the two sharing a knowing look.

"Indeed," Majestic muttered, familiar with Kannon's distaste for Khera's treatment of its conscript soldiers.

"Is the ship ready, Vallaran?"

"Yes, sir. I've looked over the controls and I'm ready to take her skyward, sir."

"This is hardly your fight, Vallaran," Zealot offered, stepping out from behind Majestic, "and this would be your first time on Earth. You were not involved in what has occurred there in the past."

"Anywhere I can find Daemonites is good enough for me, Majestrix. Khera keeps rebuilding me to fight and I won't sleep or rest until I avenge Lower Olynthia. I'll cope with Earth, don't worry about that."

"Indeed," Zealot replied, echoing Majestic's uncertainty of the young Kherubim soldier.

Vallaran was full-blooded Kherubim, but classified a low-holder in strength and resilience by the military. During the surface clashes with the D'rahn in the lower quarter of Khera's capital city, the weak Vallaran was pinned to the soil and forced to watch the rape, sodomy and mutilation of the Quarter's women. Daemonites could not breed with Kherubim, not without magic and the souls of over two thousand, but such was not their intent. That particular campaign was meant to do nothing but humiliate and demoralize the Kherubim, the virginity of its women savagely taken away as if they were nothing

but herded cattle. Vallaran choked on the blood of girls and retched at the scent of filth until the point where his mind was shattered. His psyche was repaired and so too was his body and since then it was Vallaran's hope to wash away the pain of that day with the blood and gore of D'rahn and Daemonite alike. It was this hatred and thirst for revenge that made Ferrian watch the young man closely, ever respectful of his power to channel the incredible amount of destructive energy that pumped through his veins. Kannon was a living furnace; his hatred fueling destructive energy to the point where scientists believed his body was nothing more than a shell for the being of living energy that lived inside.

"Well then, let's go aboard, shall we?"

Pre-flight checks and preparations came easy for those who had flown through space frequently. Kannon was the designated helmsman, affixing a crescent shaped mechanism over the right side of his face that allowed him to link with the Goodspeed in several ways. Ferrian sat beside him, pensive as usual and apparently plagued by some thought or another. Behind them were seats for the rest: Majestros, Zannah, Kenesha and Spartan.

"WildCORE." Ferrian whispered, looking out of the clear bulkhead and staring at the arctic wastes.

"Ferrian?" Savant perked up and looked to he who led them all.

"WildCORE. It's what we used to call ourselves. A race of aliens, formed by the humans to protect them against other races of aliens. How easily we slip back into that roll now." Ferrian pressed a gloved finger against his lip as he continued, "The earthlings trusted us, without truly knowing us; to guard them, defend them against other beings they barely knew. Then one day we decided they didn't need us anymore, that after being among them for ages, it was time for us to leave them in the hands of half-breeds and paranormals. They failed. And now, we return to take up that old role, and we might as well take on the old name as well. WildCORE... suit up. We are leaving... again."

When everyone was strapped in and prepared, the countdown sequence began, ending with a shockwave of hard-ion thrust that shook the ground and vaporized snow for miles around. Heat rose and so did the Goodspeed, gaining sufficient speed to break free of Khera's orbit and become blanketed with the starry landscape that was space. As the planetary orb that was Khera shrank away behind them, Ferrian watched the planet on a vid-screen on the Goodspeed's bridge. The others sat behind him, each of them again focusing on their own thoughts and expectations of the mission that lie ahead.

The journey would take them through a stargate, a rend in space and time created by free-floating space-fold generators. For ages, the stargates had kept these Kherubim away from their home planet but now they were much like onramps to highways that took them to planets otherwise unreachable and goals unattainable. This particular stargate would drop them at the edge of the Sol III solar system, leaving them but a matter of hours from earth's orbit thanks to superior Kherubim technology.

The trip through the rend in space and time, however, was a bit

longer. Despite the fact that time in and out of the rend did not pass the same, the newly assembled WildCORE would find themselves traveling for days inside the blank in-between spaces of space where even light did not exist.

For one Kherubim in particular, the journey was not a good one. Majestros was bathed in sweat, tears streaming from tightly closed eyes as he gripped the solar sheets between his fists. His head shook from side to side as the vision haunted him just as it had for the last several nights. His long black hair was matted against his sweat soaked forehead as the scene continued.

"Majestic! Blast them. These... kill them! Before they reach King!"

"Can't aim, to--"

"DO it, Majestic! King's task is too important."

"I'll hit YOU t--"

"Teaarr Meataall!"

"MAJESTIC!"

"Colt, I can't... you won't survive!"

"Mission MUST... be accom...plished! Any... ALL cost. Maj...estic! Godda... MIT! Shoot! King needs-- SHOOT!"

"AHHHHHH!" A blast rippled blue from Majestic's fist and with it a shout that echoed through the ship's cabin as Majestros awoke with a start.

"Majestic?!"

With a hiss, the door to Majestic's quarters swished open and Savant, barely dressed and even less awake, spilled inside. She pressed small, soft hands against Majestic's massive chest, watching it rise and fall with every breath of the dream ravaged Kherubim Lord.

"Sa... Savant. Kenesha..."

"It's okay, Majestros. I'm here. Shhhhh." Kenesha's voice soothed him and Majestros floated back to his pillow.

"Lord... Colt... what have I done?"

"What you had to do, Majestros... what you've always done." Savant rose and felt a surge of dread. Majestic slew John Colt that day against the Daemonites, an event that had taken place over two and a half centuries ago, as Despot returned from hiding. Majestic had gone into self-exile into the Arctic afterwards and Savant had brought him out, believing the guilt and pain paid for with time. Majestic was the most powerful amongst the Kherubim and Savant feared what he would become if his guilt had finally overtaken him.

"Surgical strikes on Paronis. They wanted surgical strikes... no way... to tell who was Daemonite... who was not."

Savant knew of the campaign Majestic was speaking of. The Queen's Daemonites had overtaken the population of a mineral rich planet, robbing it blind right under their noses, using the minerals to replenish Daemon. Kherubim intelligence failed to determine who were the Daemonites and who were the denizens of the sparsely populated Paronis. A Kherubim carrier group was given the order to purge the population, the loss of alien life not a concern. Majestros raced against time through space to stop the group but arrived too late. All around Majestic was the ash of the dead... not a Daemonite among them.

Savant took a step backward and but her bottom lip nervously. What did the fates have in store for WildCORE when their most purest and powerful Lord was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? "Maj... I...." Whatever words of counsel Savant had were lost when the ship's floor trembled beneath her. Time seemed to slow and for a moment there was weightlessness and the loud echo of silence that signaled the exit from a stargate. "Maj, we're here."

Majestic rose, dropping the solar sheets off his naked body as he reached for his familiar red and silver uniform. "Kenesha... Ferrian - He doesn't need to know. This will pass." Majestros stepped into this uniform and added with a whisper, "It always passes."

Savant nodded and turned away to offer Majestic his privacy. "If that's what you want, Maj."

"It is, I ---" A new sound and feeling came, one that wracked the entire ship and vibrated along the spines of all aboard. A thundering was heard in the bowels of the Goodspeed that was rapidly followed by another three. "An attack?"

"MAJESTIC. SAVANT. Get up here, now!" Ferrian's voice echoed over the loudspeakers and Savant looked into Majestic's eyes as he wrapped his cape around his neck.

"If it wasn't for bad luck..." Savant began.

"Indeed. Let us go," Majestic finished.

The bridge was already in chaos when Savant and Majestic arrived. Ferrian bellowed coordinates to Kannon who echoed and felt the weight of the Goodspeed move in reply. Spartan was on the Tactical Analysis computers, identifying the enemy while Zealot cursed and slammed a bulkhead with her fist.

"Hunter-Killers, Lord Ferrian. They are twelve in number and effectively covering our flanks. Shields are holding at 68% and weapons are charged for fire, sir."

Zealot fumed over the ship's sensors and then stopped suddenly as images flashed across the screen. The sensors had been set to gather data on Earth and with the Goodspeed arriving near Pluto, they had already begun to complete their task. The statistics of the planet and the imagery analysis was something that she could never prepare for. "By Hecate... THIS is Earth?"

"Dammit, Zealot! Never mind Earth, I need target acquisition!" Ferrian barked.



"The Hunter-Killers are too agile; they are evading our offensive weapons easily."

"Zealot is correct. The ion cannons were meant for battleships, not these drones!" Spartan shouted as sparks flew from the console overhead. "Another hit. Shields at 43%"

The Daemonite Hunter-Killers were man-sized abominations; twisted mutations of living flesh and cold machinery. The machinery protected the flesh from the coldness of space while the intelligent tissues provided unrivaled artificial intelligence. Of all the ships in the Daemon fleet, the Hunter-Killers were known for its advantage in swarming and rending larger Kherubim vessels, just as it was doing now.

"So then it appears, "Majestic stepped forward, mists of green floating from the tops of his fists, "that we need to take a more... direct approach."

"I envy you, old friend. Can you hold them off until we can make our escape?" Ferrian asked.

"I am accustomed to the harshness of space, Ferrian. \_Goodspeed\_." Majestic nodded and turned to make way for the airlock.

"Kannon, full speed for Earth. Direct all weapon power to the aft shields!"

"Way ahead of you, my Lord." Kannon willed the commands through his facial/navigation uplink array, the ship again lurching in response.

The airlock expunged Majestic as if he were space trash. Slowing his drift, he stretched outright and willed himself forward under his own power and, as he suspected, became an easy target for the Hunter-Killers. Blasts of green flashed around Majestic's fists as he blew the robotic innards out of one H-K and wrapped a thick bicep around the neck of another, popping off its head like that of a yellow dandelion. But as one fell, another three took its place and even Majestic was but one man. He ducked and shifted to avoid the flesh-cutting lasers fired from the monstrosities and spun around in horror when the blasts were too far from its mark. Majestic realized when the \_Goodspeed\_'s engine array exploded that he had been nothing more than a nuisance to them.

"They impacted our engines before we could boost the shields, Ferrian. We are losing speed. Majestic is preventing their pursuit but we are beginning to list!" Spartan informed.

Ferrian quickly looked to his display, Majestros' green aura exploding violently outward, his power wave engulfing everything around him. "That solves that problem. Zealot, find us a crash site!"

Savant's eyes bolted from Zealot to Ferrian. "Deja vu again and again."

"Tell me about it," Ferrian muttered as he crossed the length of the ship to look over Zealot's shoulder.

"It's a dead-stick, sir! Controls are sluggish! That engine surge is carrying us but not for long."

"We need to planet-fall, Ferrian before the secondary explosions reach the ion-drive's reactor. Damage systems are unable to compensate for the aft damage!"

"I'm friggin' workin' on it! Zealot!"

"Mars. It's the best we can do but I can't get an orbital window. If Kannon's aim is false we'll ricochet back into space or shatter against its atmosphere!"

"I got the aim Sister! Just give me the coordinates." Kannon fed the computer the response given by Zealot and willed the ship to slow, without avail.

"Get out nose up or we'll--"

"She's not respondin'! We're going to--"

There was a rocking within the ship as it seemed to go weightless. Ferrian looked back to his command console and saw a familiar form beneath the ship's belly. "Majestic."

Outside, Majestic struggled to slow the ship and keep its nose high all at the same time. The belly began to super-heat as it tickled the planet's outer atmosphere and Majestic squinted from the light and sensation. He held his breath, fighting to keep a hold of the Goodspeed without piercing its hull with his fingers. He grunted and growled but felt the ship slid away from him, pulling free. "No!! Just...this once...WORK! Majestic felt his fingers dig into the ship's metal frame before the friction of the atmosphere finally smacked away the Kherubim, separating him from the Goodspeed once and for all. Majestros could not find the words as he watched the ball of fire flare and speed away, becoming smaller and smaller before finally colliding with Mar's harsh surface. Once again, silence filled Mister Majestic's ears...as Mars burned beneath him.

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**\*\*Next Issue:\*\*** Majestic wants to find them alive. The Daemonites want to finish them off. The locals want to reduce the amount of noise pollution, and a familiar, silver haired leader of a Mars defense force wants to keep the peace. WildCORE has crashed on Mars and has gotten everyone all spun up in Pocket Full of Daemonites, next month from Matt Pierce and Image Future Shock!

End  
file.